

Evaluating Peer Support Programs for Youth Mental Health

CADTH conducted a [health technology assessment](#) to support decisions related to the adoption, implementation, and evaluation of formal peer support programs for youth mental health. This summary report is based on the Environmental Scan component of the health technology review and presents key findings related to formal peer support program evaluation.

Key Messages for Decision-Makers

- Formal guidance for evaluating peer support programs for youth mental health is currently lacking and evaluation practices vary across programs in Canada. However, most programs share common evaluation approaches. These include:
 - focusing on recovery-oriented outcomes (i.e., assessing how the program supports youth's recovery) as opposed to clinically oriented outcomes
 - involving youth (users and workers) throughout the evaluation to ensure relevance
 - tailoring the evaluation to reflect the local program context and the needs of peer support users.
- Despite the need for a flexible and tailored approach to evaluating individual peer support programs, it is recognized that guiding resources could support efforts to develop evaluation approaches that could be used across organizations.
- Transparency, inclusion, and representation of youth involved in peer support programs are essential considerations for evaluation practices.
- Funding and resources required for regular and rigorous program evaluations are reported as common challenges across peer support programs.

When considering implementation of peer support programs for youth mental health, decision-makers may wish to allocate resources for ongoing program evaluation. Strengthened program evaluations can improve the understanding of the benefits and maximize the effectiveness of peer support programs. In addition, practice-based evidence from the evaluation of peer support programs can be used to further support the design and implementation of appropriate, equitable, and culturally competent programs.

The findings of this Environmental Scan are based on 2 publications and information provided by peer support program representatives in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and New Brunswick. Four youth with lived experience of peer support shared knowledge that helped the research team understand the findings in the context of the experiences of youth accessing and providing peer support services.

What completed evaluations and evaluation method guidelines for formal peer support programs for youth mental health exist in Canada and internationally?

Key Findings

We identified 2 published reports with information related to evaluations of formal peer support programs for youth mental health in Canada and internationally. We also conducted 7 targeted consultations with stakeholders from organizations that offer peer support services for youth mental health in Canada. During these consultations, 3 additional program evaluation reports were shared with us, while 1 additional evaluation was shared with us through public stakeholder feedback. A list of peer support program evaluations as identified by the Environmental Scan can be found [here](#) (pages 125–128). Our Environmental Scan did not identify formal guidelines or established best practices for evaluating peer support programs.

What are the characteristics and components used in the evaluations and method guidelines for formal peer support programs for youth mental health? How are they measured?

Key Findings

The findings from the literature and stakeholder consultations show that evaluation practices vary across programs in Canada. This is mainly due to a lack of formal guidance but also because evaluation practices are often tailored to understand the needs of the individual programs, the youth engaging with these programs, or the interests of the program funders. Funding and resources required for regular and rigorous program evaluations are reported as common challenges across peer support programs.

Despite the lack of formal guidance or standardized methods, most programs share common evaluation practices. Among common approaches that are used for program evaluation are measuring real-world practice impact, focusing on

Health care decision-makers in Canada are looking for ways to improve the availability of mental health support for youth. Peer support is considered as a promising option. While peer support programs are currently delivered as part of community-based, non-governmental organizations and health care facilities, the effectiveness of these programs and their impact on mental health care resources is not well-established. Program evaluation can provide valuable information to understand the impact of peer support and guide quality improvement efforts.

The CADTH review focused on formal programs with training and supports for peer support workers, as training is an important mechanism to ensure the safety of peer support workers and users, ensure a degree in the standardization in the peer support offered, and address considerations of equity.

recovery outcomes (assessing how the program supports youth's recovery) as opposed to clinical outcomes, and involving youth in the design and conduct of evaluation (to ensure relevance). Recovery-oriented outcomes include change in emotions; relationship to education, employment, and social connections; attitudes towards personal recovery; and overall wellbeing and mental health status. Program-based (e.g., demographics of program users) and system-level outcomes (e.g., hospitalizations) are also captured by some organizations. Some program evaluations focus on data that meets the requirements of their program funding.

Most programs collect evaluation data through surveys. Other methods include one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and follow-up case studies. Data can be collected at one or multiple timepoints and some programs report that they have accessed external support for data collection and analysis.

Most organizations include youth in the design and conduct of the evaluation, as a way of ensuring youth engagement and inclusive representation, as well as evaluation relevancy.

It was noted that because peer support is meant to be a flexible mental health resource that can be tailored to respond to the needs of the user, highly standardized methods for program evaluation may not be feasible or beneficial to the integrity and appeal of the programs. Therefore, flexibility in program evaluation can be valuable as it allows to adapt practices to individual program and users' needs.

What are the findings of the completed evaluations in Canada?

Key Findings

Findings from 2 completed program evaluations were available^{1,2}. Findings from 1 program evaluation relate to the recruitment and training of peer support workers, and the implementation of a youth peer support pilot project. This evaluation informed recommendations for future program development that included: integration of youth peer support within the core mental health service system; youth engagement for program co-design; support and buy-in by leadership and youth; consideration of supports and resources for youth peer support workers including appropriate training, compensation, and professional development opportunities. The other evaluation focused on a university-based peer support program and found that university-based peer support services offer potential benefits by improving access to mental health services and addressing the mental health needs that are often present among this demographic.

■ References

1. EveryMind Mental Health Services. Executive Summary of the Legacy Report: Youth Peer Support Pilot Project. Mississauga: EveryMind; 2022.
2. Richard J, Atesoglu LR, Leung C, et al. Peers supporting peers: An evaluation of a Peer Support Centre at a Canadian University. 2019: https://cpa.ca/docs/File/Students/MindPad/MindPad_Fall2019.pdf.

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What do youth who access and youth who offer peer support consider important in a program evaluation?

Key Findings

Peer support youth advisors we spoke with shared that being transparent about why the evaluation is being conducted and why specific information is being collected is essential for their buy-in to the evaluation. To do so successfully, evaluations could be informed by and co-created with youth with lived experience. Because recovery is an ongoing process, the advisors also proposed that the benefits of peer support could be measured over time rather than at a single time point.

How can program evaluations address equity considerations for peer support?

Key Findings

Stakeholders reflected on the importance of fostering a relationship with youth who can participate in the evaluation process to hold the organization accountable to provide appropriate and safe care particularly for marginalized, racialized, and/or Indigenous youth.

As discussed by stakeholders, evaluations can reflect program goals for inclusive and equitable access by: involving youth in the evaluation design; using multiple methods for data collection to minimize barriers to feedback; ensuring that all evaluations are anonymous and data collection is confidential to ensure participant safety; avoiding the use of clinical language to minimize stigmatization; trying to identify potential inequities during participant intake to help address barriers to participation; and ensuring that evaluations are done in a culturally competent manner. One organization has implemented a virtual care program, which offers increased access to peer support programming and evaluation for rural and remote youth. In addition, they described an organizational responsibility to capture Indigenous-focused data collection and evaluate the program in a culturally competent manner.

■ Disclaimer

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